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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002517

SIPDIS

STATE/EUR FOR DAS LAURA KENNEDY

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TAGS: [AM](#) [IZ](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN DEFMIN SOLID ON IRAQ CONTINGENT

REF: YEREVAN 2494

Classified By: Amb. John Evans, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(S) Summary. In a two-hour one-on-one with the Ambassador November 18, Armenian Defense Minister Serge Sargsian confirmed that he was rock solid in his commitment to fielding the Armenian non-combat contingent to Iraq. He volunteered that the issue was with the Constitutional Court and would soon move to the National Assembly, where he would personally present it for approval. Other issues he touched on included domestic politics, Nagorno-Karabakh, concerns about Georgia and Turkey, and relations with Russia. End Summary.

2.(S) Sargsian said Armenia simply had to participate in the International Coalition in Iraq for reasons of its own state interests. Armenia opposed terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism and with Georgia and Azerbaijan participating, how could Armenia stand aloof? Sargsian said he would like to contribute a much larger contingent, but there were some very real constraints. First of all, there were not enough trained personnel. Second, Armenia was already on a "war footing" because of Karabagh. And third, premium pay for the volunteers going to Iraq was five times what Armenian servicemen on the borders of their own country were receiving. Sargsian noted that he had just returned from a National Assembly meeting at which he had argued for an increase in the defense budget occasioned by higher than expected fuel costs. This was a particular problem in view of the new aircraft he confirmed that he meant the Slovak SU-25s Armenia was in the process of obtaining.

3.(S) Prompted by the Ambassador, Sargsian launched into a tour of the domestic political landscape. Predictably, he had little positive to say about opposition leaders Demirchian and Geghamian and others. He eased up in his overall disdain for the political class by according mild approbation to Artur Baghdasarian, the Parliamentary Speaker and leader of Orinats Yerkir, and Raffi Hovhanissian, the former U.S. citizen who was Armenia's first foreign minister.

4.(S) On Nagorno-Karabagh, Sargsian said a settlement had to favor neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan; eventually, fifteen or twenty years down the road, things might look differently. He claimed that, given a choice, seventy percent of Armenians would rather live with the Azeris than with the Georgians; on a personal level, they had a record of getting along. Sargsian said the OSCE Minsk Process needed to be preserved at all costs. This was why the Azeri move in the UNGA and the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly critical reports were so dangerous.

5. (S) The Ambassador expressed concern about the situation on the line of contact and asked about rules of engagement; press reports continue to describe sporadic incidents resulting from the close contact of Armenian and Azeri troops. Sargsian said a lieutenant (vzvod commander) was authorized to return fire, but then had immediately to report to his headquarters. Of course not a meter of territory could be taken without express authorization. Sargsian dismissed Azeri talk of war, saying that even if Azerbaijan built its forces up to twice what Armenia could field, it would not suffice; Baku would need a three- or four-fold advantage to have any confidence of victory.

6.(S) On Georgia, Sargsian said he worried about the impulsiveness of the young leaders who had come to power a year ago. He said he had advised them not to bait the Russian bear. He thought they had been unwise to try to duplicate their early success in Ajara in South Ossetia, but might now have learned their lesson.

7.(S) Asked about relations with Turkey, Sargsian was wary. He also admitted that there were some reasons to tolerate the current blockade of the border with Turkey. While EU membership would be an undoubted plus for the region, one had to recall that Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 despite membership in NATO. Sargsian said it would indeed be a shame if the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi rail link were replaced

with an expensive new line that bypassed Armenian territory.

8.(S) As for relations with Russia, Sargsian said Russia was indeed Armenia traditional ally, but lamented that e have not solved all our own security problems yet. His own view, he said, was that when Russian-American relations were good, this was good for Armenia.

9.(S) Biographic note: Sargsian told the Ambassador that he was acquainted with Vladimir Putin from the days when he was in charge of Armenia National Security Service and Putin was heading the FSB in Moscow. There had been at least two group meetings of the intelligence chiefs in those years, and Sargsian said that at the one in St. Petersburg, Putin had been especially warm, giving him a big hug. Putin had also offered to help investigate the 1999 parliamentary shootings, Sargisan said, although the Armenian side had declined the offer.

EVANS